



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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WEDNESDAY MORNING, *May 10th*,
AT PORTMAN ROOMS.

THE REV. H. S. SWITHINBANK (Dulwich) presided, and after making a few announcements, called upon MRS. FISHER (Miss Arabella B. Buckley) to give her address on

THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN IN THE
OBSERVATION OF NATURE.

MRS. FISHER said: Ladies and gentlemen, in addressing members of the Parents' National Educational Union, I shall not deal with definite science training as generally given in schools, but rather with the subject of training children in the observation of Nature, from the point of view of the parent in the home.

When I first began to think over the subject of this paper, I wrote to your secretary, who kindly provided me with some particulars as to what had been already done by the Society, and I found that almost everything which I wished to recommend had been already set on foot in one place another.

I have been very much struck by the good work carried on by the P.N.E.U. for the study of Nature, and I cannot do better than urge all parents to carry out the methods suggested, though I may point out some of the best ways of doing so.

The Society has drawn up an excellent list of books, from which parents may select guides to the study of any science, and I am glad to see that it suggests the keeping of a naturalist's note-book. This is one of the things which I strongly advise. (Hear, hear.) It has also organized excursions, which I consider are admirable as incentives to individual work. Besides this the Union encourages children to make collections of various kinds, and to send them up to the annual meeting. By this means the children are taught to take care of what they collect, and to arrange them methodically.

When I came into this room just now I had put into my hand a little paper called *The Children's Quarterly*, which

gives an idea of the objects children may observe in their rambles, and of points specially to be noted. I mention this because this is only the second number, and probably many members are not yet acquainted with it. Thus you see that the chief methods which I wished to recommend have already been put before you. I will, therefore, pass on to a point to which I should like to call your attention this morning, which I think lies at the very root of the question before us. I mean the attitude of the parents themselves towards nature.

In illustration of what I mean I think I cannot do better than tell you what happened some time ago, when I was delivering a lecture at a working man's club on the growth of sponges. About a dozen microscopes were arranged at the back of the room, and, after the lecture, the men and their wives walked round and looked at the beautiful specimens of sponge-spicules under each. One of the men, after examining some exquisite spicules shaped like tiny anchors, turned to a friend and said, "Look at this! A man ought to have a microscope in his house as he has his Bible." (Hear, hear.) That man struck at the root of the matter. The real interest of nature is that it is "the garment of the Invisible," and the parents who recognize this will best lead their children to be true Nature lovers.

I do not mean that this need be taught in so many words. It is far better that it should be an unconscious influence. If the parent feels it, rest assured the child will feel it too. For children are much nearer to Nature than we who are older. The flowers, bees and birds are far more part of their world than in the case of grown-up people, whose minds have become clogged with the conventionalities of life. When their eager questions are carefully answered, with a real desire to find out the purpose underlying all things, it is not only an education but also a great delight to them. Formal scientific teaching for children has its use, but I also believe strongly in the value of *desultory teaching*, here a little and there a little, face to face with Nature.

The observation of the world around us divides itself naturally into two groups, the study of physical science and the study of life. Astronomy has a great fascination for children, and they have plenty to learn in it with the naked eye. The shape of the constellations, their time of rising

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and setting at different seasons of the year; the most conspicuous nebulae, such as the nebula of Orion; the star-clusters, such as the Pleiades; and the chief regions of the Milky Way, are all delightful to a child, and are all visible without a telescope. And here let me give a warning. Do not let children use the telescope or the microscope too young, for there can be no doubt that these instruments try the eyes, already too much tried in these days with reading.

Physical geography is another source of pleasure which presents itself in every country walk. The action of water in rain, waterfalls, streams and rivers, in frost and snow, may often be pointed out, and as a result of this study you will find that scenery has an added charm to young people, when they can trace where the river has worn its way through the hills, or how these hills determine the direction of the watersheds.

This leads us on naturally to geology, a most interesting study, though I do not think that it is specially adapted to children,* because it deals so largely with theories which require an intimate acquaintance with fossils and mineralogical specimens before they can be understood. This study is, however, in one way to be recommended, because in pursuing it you do not require to kill anything. (Hear, hear.)

Geology forms the link between the physical and the life-sciences, and here I want especially to call attention to the change which has come over our theories of life within the last half-century. If you look at the old science books you will see that most of them were what might be called "goody-goody" books, almost always dwelling on the goodness of God in having made all animal life so happy. In these old books the facts of the struggle for life were left out of sight; it was assumed that the lower animals were without care, and that "only man is vile." They forgot what Paul pointed out hundreds of years ago, that "all creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now."

The simple child knew better, and when he was taught that "Birds in their little nests agree," he replied, "No, they don't; they squabble, and kick each other out."

* After my speech a mother told me that her children loved to collect fossils, and she was sorry I did not approve of geology. But I do approve of fossil collecting, for the children grow older this will give them the foundation for a study of geology.

A far deeper and truer view of life has arisen from the discovery of Mr. Darwin that plants and animals were not made once for all as we now find them, but have been gradually developed by the selection of those which have best adapted themselves to their life.

This leads us to see that *effort* lies at the root of all life, from the mechanical effort of the plant, which grows towards the light even in a cellar, and which lifts itself by hooks and tendrils, to the ingenuity shown by the bird which builds the nest for its young, the animal which hunts for its prey, or the bees which work for the hive. The discovery of this truth, that all the diversity of plant and animal life has arisen from the struggle for existence, in which each being has to strive its best, and exercise ingenuity and patience, takes nothing away from the brightness of life. The enjoyment of the sweet singing-birds is no less sweet, nor does the animal basking in the sun, or galloping over the plain, enjoy itself one whit the less, from the fact that each must fulfil his duty in life. Above all things I would lead children to dwell on the joyousness of all living things. But evolution also takes account of the other side of the picture, and shows that pleasure is not the *whole* object even of animal life. And so in the place of the old idea that the lower creation is perfect, and without care, we learn that throughout life—

“Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day”—

that everywhere there is effort towards fuller and higher life.

If with this another truth is recognized, namely, that science teaches that in the universe nothing is lost, the painful shock of death, which comes to every child in first losing a pet, may be changed to hopeful trust. I should not like to emphasize my own feelings, but I would point out to a child that all life is moving onwards, and that its pet, whose life was ended here, had gone to God's keeping.

And now, as to practical work. I suppose that I am speaking chiefly to London parents, who work under difficulties, because London life is artificial, and it is difficult to see living things in their natural surroundings. But I think you

will find that much may be done. I have often been struck by the fact that in the very centre of London there are such numbers of birds which can be heard and seen. Insects also, such as silkworms, and water-animals in aquariums are not difficult to keep. One of my earliest recollections is the keeping of tadpoles in a glass vase in London until they became frogs. There are also very few houses in town which have not a back garden, while children can study trees, birds, and insects in the parks.

It is well too in town to prepare for the next holiday which will be spent in the country. Children will observe better after they have learned what there is to observe. I remember Professor Tyndall telling me that once he was going to show an experiment to Faraday. As he was going to begin the old man put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Tell me first what I am to look for." And so it is with the children, we want to give them a clue that they may learn to look aright.

Thus any subject which is likely to be met with at the next holiday trip may be studied beforehand. And for this you must have a few good books of reference, such as you will find in the list I have mentioned. Buy good books, even if you can afford but few. Cheap manuals are with few exceptions worth just what you pay for them, while five or six good works such as *Chambers' Encyclopedia*, *Lydekker's Natural History*, *Figuier's Insect World*, *Ball's Story of the Heavens*, or his *Starland*; *Bentham's Botany*, and *John's British Birds* will make a library of reference of real value.

One advantage of choosing a subject for a holiday is that you can take with you the reference books relating to it. Children will generally be in the country either at Easter, Whitsuntide, the autumn, or Christmas, and at each season there is something to study. At Christmas there are the stars, the forms of ice and snow, and the branching of trees. If the children are taught the way that the trees branch in the winter they will understand their forms in summer. At Easter, the tadpoles and newts in ponds, the nesting of birds, the early flowers, and bird-song can all be studied. At Whitsuntide, flowers and insects, with their relation to each other, the life of bees, butterflies, and ants, in fact the whole range of plant and animal life offer themselves for study. In autumn (the chief family holiday), the flowers are nearly over,

but we have the fruits and cereals, the habits of game animals, the flocking of birds before they migrate, and, by the seaside, life in the pools is very rich and abundant, while the short evenings bring the stars again in view.

So much for London children. Those living in the country can observe all the year round. They can bring home word what fresh flower or bird they have noticed, and when they see the first butterfly, or any other insect or animal.

I think that a good deal of useful work might be done in this way, especially with combined effort. (Hear, hear.) For if each family kept a naturalist's diary, and a certain number of families compared their observations, they might send up a report to some centre in their district, and these again might be reported to the central Union.

In this way it might be noted at what date flowers of the same kind appear in different localities, or in what succession they appear in any given locality. Such information would be of great use to the naturalist, and I do not see why children should not do good work for the world in this way—(hear, hear)—while they would also learn a great deal.

The main thing, however, is to lead the children to see what is around them, and to enter into the life of all living beings. In this way they will learn to look upon nature as part of the one great scheme under which we all live, doing each our own work for the good of all as best we may; that by our efforts we may both improve ourselves and help others, leaving the results to the Great Being in whom we live and move. (Cheers.)

MRS. J. M. MARSHALL (Hon. Sec. Children's Natural History Club, Dulwich Branch): I should like to know whether there would not be great difficulty in working the scheme which Mrs. Fisher has referred to. Would there not be difficulty in finding people to give free lectures? We could not afford to pay lecturers and I am afraid we have exhausted our local people. If anyone could send me the names of those who would be willing to help us in this direction, I should be very glad.

MRS. HART DAVIS: I should like to say, in the name of the Reading Branch, that we have very little difficulty in getting suitable addresses from people willing to help us in various ways in regard to the study of Natural History.

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We have a Branch which was started about three years ago, and from that Branch emanates the little green paper which no doubt you have just seen. I think that if there were better communications between the Natural History Clubs of the various Branches, we might supply one another with useful lecturers. We in Reading find plenty of people to come and speak for us, many being students themselves, and some in connection with the University College. But I think that we ought to have no difficulty in getting lecturers if the expenses were paid. I think that these expenses would usually have to be paid because, in Reading for instance, many of the men and women who come and speak would not be able to pay their own expenses. Some of these lecturers are men who come to speak after their day's work is done. I know one who is compelled to lie on his back all day. He has a small garden and takes notes of the things to grow in it and of the birds and insects, and I may say that he has a vast amount of knowledge upon such subjects. That is the kind of knowledge we want. That man has also kept a naturalist's note-book ever since he was an infant, and I have seen similar cases also. We find a good deal of this sort of work done among Quakers. (Hear, hear.) I find that they are people who give a large amount of attention to this sort of thing—indeed it is part of their religion. They began this work when they were young and have gone on year by year, and finally you have a splendid work because it has gone on from generation to generation. Of course you find similar work in other places, we at Reading have a new Branch with a membership of about one hundred and fifty, and my daughter is the secretary of it. (Cheers.)

MRS. HENRY PERRIN: I feel very strongly that this inter-communication between the various Branches would be a very good thing, and if we could form a Committee to carry out this suggestion I think that most valuable results would follow. The Session is almost at an end now, but I think that next Session we might do something in this direction. In London we think that we are not doing much good at present in this direction, but I think that we might do a great deal in this forward movement.

MISS BIRRELL: I should like to say that I think we might do more if we paid greater attention to the wonders of Nature

around us. In the parks we can see thousands of interesting things. I speak from experience, because I feel that I did not open my eyes to things around me until about three years ago, when I read Miss Mason's book. (Hear, hear.) Before that time I really did not know that a sycamore tree had flowers, and I remember a friend of mine saying that botany was the study of leaves and flowers and trees, and that the idea of studying Nature from the beautiful flowers and other things around us had never occurred to her. And I think it is quite true that such an idea has not dawned upon many of us—we have been too busy with our books. (Laughter and hear, hear.) I do not see why every mother in London should not make a point of going to Kensington Gardens, or some of the other parks, and let their children see the first dawn of the life of the trees. To see the trees flowering—that the elms had blossom, and the poplar bloom, was a revelation to me. We have, I think, a wealth of Nature before our eyes even in London, and if I were a parent I think I should have a very strong case against so-called teachers who do not insist upon the children studying Nature. Miss Mason is training, at the House of Education, young ladies such as we very much require, and I am quite sure that you will agree that this work is one well worthy of our support. (Cheers.)

THE CHAIRMAN: I feel sure that we shall all thank Mrs. Fisher for her extremely stimulating words, for the germ of thoughts which she has given us and the suggestions that are eminently practical, and will become practicable in a short time among the Branches and lead to more centralization. (Hear, hear.)

MRS. FISHER: I cordially agree with what the last lady said about our teaching dry subjects and forgetting too much the interesting things of Nature that lie under our eyes. It is Nature-teaching that we want, for it ensures a love of Nature to watch what is going on under our eyes. Then secondly, what she says about the Branches being in closer communication seems to me of great importance. I think there might be some central body to which these Branches could refer when, for instance, they required lecturers to come and help them. There was one thing I omitted to mention, and that is that I think even London children might be

brought to help country children. Country children are very often not able to identify their specimens, or learn facts about them, from the want of a library of references. But if they were in touch with London children, these last might often refer to books in the British Museum of Natural History at South Kensington, or other libraries, and both would be benefitted. In this way one link might be established between the town and the country, and the children might correspond with each other.

MISS HART DAVIS: The children of the country might send up things for the London children.

MRS. FISHER: Yes, just so.

DR. H. LAING GORDON then read a paper on

PARENTAL PECULIARITIES AND PARENTAL POSSIBILITIES.

To those members who have assisted in the formation of a new branch of the P.N.E.U., the truth will have come home that success depends less upon the trustworthiness of principles than upon the manner in which they are put into practice. The Union exists as you know in London and its suburbs as well as in cathedral, manufacturing, market, seaside and residential towns. In each locality the influence of occupation and environment modifies the needs of parents. The rank of society to which members belong would also modify requirements; but at present our work is limited more or less to the more prosperous classes. Those who have knowledge of the lower classes recognize that much might be done amongst them by the Union. This has been urged on a previous occasion by Mr. Rooper and is emphasized by the fact that applications for speakers to the poor are not infrequently made to the Union. But there is scope enough for our voluntary efforts in our own ranks, at least for the present.

Although requirements vary according to locality and surroundings, the principles of the Union are capable of adaptation everywhere; indeed they flourish in any soil so long as they are carefully planted, tended and nourished. Much of the early work of a new branch is merely a turning